

Journal of Latin American Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/LAS>

Additional services for *Journal of Latin American Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



A Revolutionary Modernity: The Cultural Policy of the Cuban Revolution

NICOLA MILLER

Journal of Latin American Studies / Volume 40 / Special Issue 04 / November 2008, pp 675 - 696

DOI: 10.1017/S0022216X08004719, Published online: 04 December 2008

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0022216X08004719

How to cite this article:

NICOLA MILLER (2008). A Revolutionary Modernity: The Cultural Policy of the Cuban Revolution. Journal of Latin American Studies, 40, pp 675-696 doi:10.1017/S0022216X08004719

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

A Revolutionary Modernity: The Cultural Policy of the Cuban Revolution*

NICOLA MILLER

Abstract. This article seeks to explain why such a wide range of Cuban cultural producers have opted to remain on the island and work ‘within the revolution’, despite all the notorious problems caused by state censorship, political persecution and material shortages. It accounts for the importance of culture to the legitimacy of the revolutionary government; suggests that the regime has drawn effectively on the long-established significance of culture in Cuba’s radical tradition; and illustrates the extent to which the government has backed up its rhetoric of commitment to culture for all with a sustained policy of support for institutions, organisations and events across the island. The main argument is that culture has been a key element – perhaps the only successful element – in the revolution’s attempt to implement an alternative model of modernity that was distinctive not only from the Western capitalist version but also from that promoted by the Soviet Union.

Keywords: Cuba, culture, cultural policy, modernity, civil society, decolonisation

The battlefield for the creation of a new civilization
is ... absolutely mysterious, absolutely
characterized by the unforeseeable and the
unexpected (Antonio Gramsci).¹

Introduction

Two features of Cuban culture since the revolution have attracted particular attention. First, the revolutionary government has long been well known for a general (albeit changeable) policy of restrictions on cultural freedom and for specific instances of persecution of individual intellectuals for homosexuality and/or alleged dissidence.² Second, a remarkable range of Cuba’s

Nicola Miller is Professor of Latin American History, University College London. Email: ucranam@ucl.ac.uk

* The author would like to thank the two anonymous *JLAS* reviewers for their constructive criticisms. Stimulating comments from students at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Mexico City, helped me to clarify the ideas in this article.

¹ Antonio Gramsci, ‘Marinetti the Revolutionary’ [1921], in Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (eds.) (London, 1985), pp. 49–51, p. 50.

² See *Index on Censorship*, 1989, no. 3, which contains an article ‘Cuba 30 years on’, pp. 11–21. For the broader impact on culture (especially theatre) of official policies

cultural production has found international success, extending from films such as *Strawberry and Chocolate*, which achieved both box-office popularity and critical acclaim, to the athletic ballet dancing of Carlos Acosta (whose memoirs were serialised as BBC Radio 4's 'Book of the Week' in December 2007), to the songs of Silvio Rodríguez, the detective novels of Leonardo Padura, the poetry of Nicolás Guillén, the plays of Abelardo Estorino (which have been well-received in New York and Miami) and the paintings of Roberto Fabelo, whose graphic representations of human heads fetch high prices in the international art market. It is often argued that such achievements became possible mainly because of changes that took place during the 1990s when the Cuban government, deprived of Soviet subsidies, cautiously opened up to transnational market forces. It has been suggested that Cuba has recently entered – belatedly – into the general postmodern condition, after the failure of the attempt to implement a revolutionary model of modernity.³ Emblematic – some would say symptomatic – of the Cuban revolution's inability to retain control of its own cultural capital, is the ubiquity of the iconic image of Che Guevara, comprehensively exploited as a marketing device by an ever-flexible transnational capitalism more than prepared to market visionary idealism if that's what sells.⁴

Without seeking to deny the significance of either the cultural repression or the changes of the 1990s, in this article I suggest that there is still a lot about Cuban cultural production that these two factors do not explain.⁵ Not

against homosexuals during the 1960s and 1970s, see playwright Abelardo Estorino's account in John M. Kirk and Leonardo Padura Fuentes, *Culture and the Cuban Revolution: Conversations in Havana* (Gainesville, FL, 2001), pp. 58–9; also Lourdes Argüelles and B. Ruby Rich, 'Homosexuality, Homophobia and Revolution', *Signs*, 9 (1984), pp. 683–99. There is also valuable information in the annual *Amnesty International* reports on Cuba. On the effects of censorship and strategies for evading it, see Seymour Menton, *Prose Fiction of the Cuban Revolution* (Texas, 1975) and Linda S. Howe, *Transgression and Conformity: Cuban Writers and Artists After the Revolution* (Madison, 2004). For an account of the experience of one leading writer and film-maker who stayed in Cuba until the early 1990s, see Lilliam Oliva Collmann, *Jesús Díaz: El ejercicio de los límites de la expresión revolucionaria en Cuba* (New York, 1999). For a brief survey of exile literature, see Rafael Rojas, 'The Knots of Memory: Culture, Reconciliation and Democracy in Cuba', in Bert Hoffman and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Debating Cuban Exceptionalism* (New York, 2007), pp. 165–86.

³ Catherine Davies, 'Surviving (on) the Soup of Signs: Postmodernism, Politics and Culture in Cuba', *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2000), pp. 103–21.

⁴ For a general critique of this phenomenon, see George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of culture in the global era* (Durham, NC, and London, 2003).

⁵ Throughout this article I understand 'culture' as the arts, rather than in the anthropological sense of a way of life or, as has often been the case in studies of Cuba, as political culture. Tzvi Medin, *Cuba: The Shaping of Revolutionary Consciousness* (Boulder, 1990); Julie Bunck, *Fidel Castro and the quest for a revolutionary culture in Cuba* (University Park PA, 1994); Jorge Domínguez, *Order and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1978), chap. 12 'Political Culture'.

least is the widespread sense that Cuba's cultural achievements are far greater than might be expected given its size, its population (of some ten to eleven million people) and its gross national product. Cuba has generated a galaxy of internationally renowned film directors, singers, musicians, ballet dancers, poets, novelists, playwrights and visual artists on a par with far larger countries, both in Latin America and in other parts of the world. Is this activity really something which has only happened on the margins of the Cuban revolution? Did it only become possible when the state was obliged to cede its promotional role in culture to the transnational market? Is it really the case that the revolutionary government's cultural policy has always and only been either ineffectual or ill-disposed? As has been recognised, the degree of freedom permitted to artists has oscillated over the years. It is not difficult for the historian to account for any of the specific periods when cultural repression intensified, which tended to occur at times when the government was under particular duress from international pressures and became correspondingly less willing to tolerate any challenges at home. What is harder to explain is the recurrence of periods of official relaxation in cultural policy, easing of censorship and encouragement – or at least acceptance – of experimentation and innovation. Furthermore, perhaps the most important question is: why is it that so many Cuban writers, artists, actors and musicians have demonstrated a commitment to staying and working 'within the revolution', despite their various doubts and concerns about aspects of government policy?

A Problematic Periodisation

Analysts of Cuban culture after 1959 tend to concur on a chronology, which in outline proceeds as follows. There was a heady period of unrestricted creativity in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, but this was prematurely brought to an end by the *PM* affair (the censoring of a film showing hedonistic youth frolicking in night-time Havana), which culminated in Castro's '*Palabras a los intelectuales*' (Words to the Intellectuals) of April 1961, in the same month as the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. His famous declaration 'within the revolution, everything, against the revolution, nothing' had a range of possible meanings,⁶ but was interpreted in an increasingly restrictive way by the state, particularly when Cuba's relationship with the USSR sharply deteriorated in 1967–8.⁷ As a result, even significant advances made by the

⁶ Fidel Castro, '*Palabras a los intelectuales*' (Havana, 1961). All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

⁷ The words became virtually talismanic, an almost ritual citation. It is beyond the scope of this article, but a close analysis of the many ways in which this statement has been interpreted, appropriated and ironised in a variety of contexts, both official and unofficial,

revolution were deemed to have been undermined by the effects of repression. For example, the dramatic expansion in book production after 1959, which continued into the 1980s, was compromised in 1967 when all publishing was taken over by the state, so that the newly-founded Instituto del Libro became a writer's only possible outlet.⁸ The Padilla Affair of 1971, when Cuba came close to a Soviet-style show trial of poet Heberto Padilla, is customarily represented as the inevitable outcome of a build-up of tensions between the Cuban government and the intelligentsia during the late 1960s.⁹ The 1970s, particularly 1971–6, are widely characterised as *el quinquenio gris* (the grey years), when Cuban society became more structured along Soviet lines in return for Moscow's agreement to fund a degree of Cuban industrialisation. It was not until the Cuban government abandoned Soviet-style economic policy in the mid-1980s and began a process of 'rectification' of previous errors that a cultural revival took place, most notably in experimental art. With the fall of the USSR in 1991, the argument concludes, Cuban culture was even further liberated from the constraints imposed by authoritarian centralism. Despite the material constraints of the 'special period', cultural workers were able to carve out new spaces for creative activity and debate, partly helped by greater access to an international market for their products. When the guiding hand of the state was forced to withdraw, a thousand flowers could finally bloom. Thus, the cultural vitality of the post-Soviet age in Cuba is represented as the outcome of a fundamentally 'liberal' separation of culture and politics brought about and enforced by globalisation.

This periodisation is not without foundation, and at least some elements of it seem to command agreement both inside and outside Cuba. Many participants in the events of the 1960s, not only intellectuals but also people experiencing education and culture for the first time, have indeed recalled the

would reveal much about the history of Cuban culture under the Revolution. Roberto Fernández Retamar makes some interesting points in 'Cuarenta años después', *La Gaceta de Cuba*, 2001, pp. 47–53.

⁸ An oft-quoted statistic is that in 1958 one million books a year were published in Cuba, in print runs of one or two thousand copies, whereas by 1977 some 24 million books were published, with print runs of five thousand to 80,000 copies each. Francisco López Segrera, 'Notas para una historia social de la cultura cubana', *Temas*, no. 5 (1985), pp. 5–16, p. 12. See Pamela Smorkaloff, *Readers and Writers in Cuba: A Social History of Print Culture, 1830s–1930s* (New York, 1997), chap. 5 for a full account of the history of Cuban publishing.

⁹ For accounts of the notorious Padilla affair, see Lourdes Casal, *El caso Padilla: literatura y revolución en Cuba. Documentos* (Miami, 1971) and her chapter, 'Literature and Society', in Carmelo Mesa-Lago, ed., *Revolutionary Change in Cuba* (Pittsburgh, 1971), pp. 447–69; *Index on Censorship*, Summer 1972 (special issue entitled *Cuba: Revolution and the Intellectual, The Strange Case of Heberto Padilla*); José Yglesias, 'The Case of Heberto Padilla', *New York Review of Books*, 3 June 1971, pp. 3–8; Padilla's own memoir, *La mala memoria* (Barcelona, 1989); and the recollections of others close to events in Kirk and Padura Fuentes, *Culture and the Cuban Revolution*, esp. pp. 29–33, 84–8, 116–7 and 128.

aftermath of the revolution as a period of extraordinary creativity marked by a moving sense of common purpose.¹⁰ Likewise, it is widely accepted – even by the government itself, of late – that the first half of the 1970s were bleak years during which the state sought to enforce a crude version of revolutionary culture, calling upon intellectuals to maintain ‘a vigilant stance against ideas and customs from the past and against any form of revisionism’.¹¹ Most Cuban cultural figures seem to agree that the situation improved to some extent with the foundation of the Ministry of Culture in 1976, with Armando Hart as Minister, and that it improved dramatically when Hart was replaced by Abel Prieto in 1997. During the 1980s opportunities increased for cultural producers to travel and publish their work abroad, a freedom previously enjoyed only by the very eminent, such as writer Alejo Carpentier. Equally, in the early 1990s there was a manifest official shift away from a Sovietised version of Marxism-Leninism (back) to Cuban progressive nationalism laced with a dash of Marxism. This change was inscribed in the constitutional amendments of 1992, which established the guiding force of the revolution as ‘the worldview [*el ideario*] of José Martí and the socio-political ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin’, instead of ‘the victorious doctrine of Marxism-Leninism’, as in the 1976 version. The revised constitution also stated that thenceforth education and cultural policy would be founded on ‘the advances of science and technology, Marxist thought and the ideas of José Martí [*el ideario marxista y martiano*], the progressive Cuban pedagogic tradition and the universal pedagogic tradition’ rather than solely on ‘the scientific conception of the world, established and developed by Marxism-Leninism’.¹² It is also widely

¹⁰ Reynaldo González, editor of the magazine *Pueblo y Cultura*, who later rebelled against what he called ‘sloganism’, remembered the early 1960s ecstatically as a time when ‘everything was new. Including us. We were discovering [everything around us] and we were discovering ourselves. We were making [things] and we were making ourselves. We were beginning to breathe an air that we wanted to make our own, shaped by us. Joy and strength in life [...]’, in *Revolución y Cultura*, 2006, no. 1, p. 48. For another intellectual’s account, see Leonardo Acosta, ‘*Pueblo y Cultura y Revolución y Cultura*: Dos números envueltos en el misterio’, *Revolución y Cultura*, 2006, no. 2, pp. 50–5, p. 50. See also the recollections of 1 January 1959 published by leading Cuban writers on the twentieth anniversary of the revolution, in *La Gaceta de Cuba*, no. 174 (Jan. 1979), pp. 6–9. For the wider impact of the government’s culture-for-all policy, see Mona Rosendahl, *Inside the Revolution: Everyday Life in Socialist Cuba* (Ithaca and London, 1997), especially the testimony of one peasant woman, who was born in 1947 and so started secondary school just after the revolution: ‘They taught us everything, everything. [...] They wanted to cram all culture into our heads, just like that, in one stroke. The century of ignorance that made us so backward, they wanted to take that away in no time’ (p. 131).

¹¹ ‘Dictámenes’ of the Second UNEAC Congress, in *La Gaceta de Cuba*, no. 162 (November–December 1977), pp. 11–15, p. 12.

¹² *Constitución de la República de Cuba*, Departamento de Orientación Revolucionaria del Comité Central del Partido Comunista Cubano (Havana, 1976), pp. 12, 30; and *Constitución de la República de Cuba* (Havana, 1992), pp. 2, 19.

agreed that for much of the 1990s the Cuban government was so pre-occupied by the economic problems caused by the loss of Soviet aid that it focused mainly on containing political dissension and – whether by accident or design is disputed – left cultural production more or less to its own devices. So far, so much consensus.

Even so, it is worth pausing here to note that there are several features of this periodisation that are not widely accepted among Cuban cultural producers, particularly when evidence from the performance arts is taken into account. The story above is primarily a writer's story. This point comes out vividly in the interviews with thirteen leading Cuban cultural figures recently carried out by John Kirk and Leonardo Padura. For example, Silvio Rodríguez, notoriously banned from performing in the late 1960s for publicly acknowledging the influence of the Beatles on his music, preferred not to draw so stark a contrast between the liberated sixties and the constrained seventies.¹³ Even among writers, a long series of caveats and qualifications would be introduced to reinstate the value of grey as a marker of subtlety, a salutary modifier of the extremes of black and white, rather than as a fixed symbol of suffocating bleakness. A survey of Cuban periodicals over the last decade or so also brings to light many indications of such attitudes. For example, recent articles in *Revolución y Cultura*, published by the *Instituto del Libro*, argued that even in the 'grey years' of the 1970s the magazine's text might have been conformist but its design was experimental – 'cross-current [*contracorriente*]' – and it was sufficiently attractive to become the most popular magazine of the time after *Bohemia*.¹⁴

In their interviews with Kirk and Padura, many cultural figures who remain in Cuba recalled that in any case official control did not always conform to established patterns. Cultural policy operated with various degrees of intensity at different levels of society and in various locations. Besides, there were distinct limits to what the government could achieve. A comprehensive mapping of this complex history is a task for future researchers, probably following whatever kind of transition takes place in Cuba, but pieces of the jigsaw can be collected up from recent interviews and

¹³ Kirk and Padura, *Culture*, pp. 10–11. Rodríguez said: 'I believe that the 1970s were in fact kinder than the 1960s' and when reminded of the leading figures who had been marginalised in the 1970s (including José Lezama Lima, Virgilio Piñera and Antón Arrufat), he accepted the point but noted that it applied more to writers than to 'those who sing, dance and produce cinema'. 'Personally', he added, 'I think the 1960s were a more difficult period, among other things because it was the time when the class conflicts in the country reached their peak. And it was a class struggle to the death. The mountains of Cuba were full of counterrevolutionaries, there was the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the Missile Crisis.'

¹⁴ Acosta, 'Pueblo y Cultura', esp. p. 54. Acosta was editor of *Revolución y Cultura* from 1974 to 1978.

periodical articles.¹⁵ The Experimental Sound Group, for example, was excluded from television but became known through the film industry: 'many films had our music. The attempt to marginalize us was as futile as trying to block out the sun with a single finger'.¹⁶ One of the earliest issues of *Temas* carried an intriguing discussion of the constraints encountered by the government when it attempted to intervene in theatre.¹⁷

Arguably, each decade had its instances of repression and its possibilities for liberation. Attention has rightly been drawn recently to the possibilities for critical debate opened up in the new journals of the 1990s, notably *Temas* and *Contracorriente* (both dating from 1995), but it is also worth bearing in mind that *Pensamiento Crítico*, published from 1967 to 1971, developed a comparable reputation;¹⁸ and *Casa de las Américas*, albeit not known for debates, has long been renowned for publishing quite a wide range of authors from abroad, especially from Latin America, the extensive cultural presence of which in Cuba is often ignored by critics who claim that the revolution is closed to the outside world.¹⁹ Moreover, there were also instances of repression during the 1990s: for example, the *Centro de Estudios sobre América*, established in 1977, was closed down in 1996. In a long history of difficulties, it is hard – and in any case to many Cubans this may seem pointless – to identify the worst of times.

The real difficulty with the story told above, however, is not the debateable accuracy of its precise contours, but the problematic assumptions upon which it is based. These are two standard Anglo-American liberal nostrums: first, that cultural production should be autonomous from politics;²⁰ and, second, that civil society and the state should be thought of as two distinct entities that are in constant tension. Yet there is a long history in Cuba, dating back at least to the late nineteenth century, of a different understanding of the relationships between culture and politics and between civil

¹⁵ Apart from Kirk and Padura, *Culture*, see Emilio Bejel, *Escribir en Cuba: Entrevistas con escritores cubanos 1979–1989* (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, 1991); 'From Cuba', special issue of *boundary 2*, 29:3 (Fall 2002) and 'Bridging Enigma: Cubans on Cuba', special issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 96:1 (Winter 1997).

¹⁶ Silvio Rodríguez, in Kirk and Padura, *Culture*, p. 11.

¹⁷ Haydée Salas, 'Sobre la efectividad de la medición socio-económica en la actividad teatral', *Temas*, no. 5, 1985, pp. 17–33.

¹⁸ Arturo Arango, 'Algunas objeciones', *Temas*, no. 19, 1990, pp. 73–7, p. 77; Kepa Artaraz, 'El ejercicio de pensar: The Rise and Fall of *Pensamiento Crítico*', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 24:3 (2005), pp. 348–66.

¹⁹ Judith A. Weiss, *Casa de las Américas: An Intellectual Review in the Cuban Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1977).

²⁰ These assumptions are not always explicitly stated but underlie many criticisms of Cuban cultural policy, e.g. Georgina Dopico Black, 'The Limits of Expression: Intellectual Freedom in Postrevolutionary Cuba', *Cuban Studies* 19 (1989), pp. 107–41; and Antonio Benítez Rojo, 'Comments on Dopico Black's "The Limits of Expression: Intellectual Freedom in Postrevolutionary Cuba"', *Cuban Studies*, 20 (1990), pp. 171–4.

society and the state, an understanding of both relationships as more intertwined than in the liberal ideal.²¹ The Cuban historian Rafael Hernández has convincingly argued that in Cuba civil society is not conceptualised either as liberal (as an economic sphere) or as conventionally Marxist (as the sphere of political institutions) but rather in Gramscian terms that leave open the possibility for creative overlap – rather than opposition – between civil society and the revolutionary state.²² Especially in the 1960s, it was not only the Cuban government that was uncertain about the appropriate role for art and culture in a revolutionary society, but also many writers and artists themselves, as shown in Andrew Salkey's reportage of the 1968 Cultural Congress in Havana.²³ At this event, Julio Cortázar was adamant that the ivory-tower intellectual was dead, and C. L. R. James went even further to propose that intellectuals should stop seeing themselves as the embodiment of culture, provoking a defence by several Cuban delegates of the value of the independent intellectual as a potentially distinguished contributor to a collective patrimony.²⁴ The issue was an international one, but it took on special resonance in relation to Cuba, which was widely seen – and represented itself – as an alternative model to the Eastern bloc. Debates about the extent to which culture should or could aspire to be independent from ideology and politics were by no means straightforward clashes between a government insisting on political commitment on the one hand and artists and writers demanding independence on the other.

This article is based on the premise that, as argued by Rafael Hernández, to categorise all Cubans as either *fidelista* or dissident is to underestimate the extent to which meaningful debate has taken place in Cuba, and 'an autonomous, critical, and organic' revolutionary tradition exists.²⁵ Sujatha Fernandes, also adopting a Gramscian perspective and looking mainly at the 1990s, found evidence for what she called 'artistic public spheres', not bounded in the Habermasian sense, but overlapping with both state institutions and market forces, as 'sites of interaction and discussion among ordinary citizens generated through the medium of art and popular culture'.²⁶

²¹ For a short Cuban analysis, see López Segrera, 'Notas'.

²² Rafael Hernández, *Looking at Cuba: Essays on Culture and Civil Society* (Gainesville, 2003).

²³ Andrew Salkey, *Havana Journal* (Harmondsworth, UK, 1971).

²⁴ Salkey, *Havana Journal*, p. 110.

²⁵ Jorge Luis Acanda, preface to Hernández, *Looking at Cuba*, pp. vii–viii.

²⁶ Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures* (Durham NC, and London, 2006), esp. pp. 2–3. Carollee Bengelsdorf has also argued that 'Cuban civil society was never absorbed by the state in a manner parallel to Russia'. See her book *The Problem of Democracy in Cuba: Between Vision and Reality* (Oxford and New York, 1994), p. 179. For the most recent work, see Alexander I. Gray and Antoni Kapcia, *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society* (Gainesville, 2008). Also relevant is Damián J. Fernández, *Cuba and the Politics of Passion* (Austin, 2000), which explores the politics of informality in Cuba.

As was also noted by Fernandes, Cuban scholars have approached state/civil society relations in this way, showing the various ways in which ‘cultural contestation came to be situated within the socialist state apparatus rather than in opposition to it’.²⁷ Building on these findings about civil society and the state, this article sketches out some ideas for rethinking the relationship between culture and politics in Cuba. It makes no claim to be comprehensive; indeed, it could not possibly be so, because many of the areas indicated have yet to be fully researched. Drawing mainly on an extensive survey of Cuban periodicals, particularly from the 1990s onwards, it works towards a possible explanatory framework for understanding the extraordinary fertility and appeal of Cuban culture since the Revolution.

A Useable Past

It is well known that the close relationship between culture and politics in Cuba dates back to the early nineteenth century. The onset of modernisation towards the end of the colonial period brought a degree of institutional separation, but differentiation between the two spheres never became as marked as in Western Europe, the English-speaking liberal democracies or some other parts of Latin America. Nor was it seen as desirable in Cuba that it should do so. Indeed, it is arguable that during the 1920s an alliance was forged between revolutionary intellectuals and organised workers in Cuba that was the most enduring and successful in Latin America. In the founding of the Cuban Communist Party (1925) by student-intellectuals Julio Antonio Mella and Rubén Martínez Villena, alongside workers’ leaders such as Fabio Grobart, Cuban intellectuals enacted what José Mariátegui envisaged, but was unable to achieve in Peru, namely a lasting political relationship between intellectuals and the masses. Students and intellectuals played an important part in bringing about the first Cuban Revolution, in 1933, which briefly brought a government led by intellectuals to power. One legacy of 1933 that has not received sufficient attention is that it cemented the importance of culture in Cuba’s radical tradition. The revolutionary leaders of the 1950s – most of whom were university graduates – drew upon this element as a source of legitimacy just as much as they drew upon others that have been more extensively researched, namely Martí’s thought; *cubanía*; or the anti-colonial wars.²⁸ Official

²⁷ Fernandes, *Cuba Represent!*, p. 8. See also ‘Enfoque: Modernidad y sociedad civil: una revisión’, *Temas*, no. 46, abril–junio 2006, pp. 3–75.

²⁸ Tony Kapcia, *Island of Dreams* (Oxford, 2000); Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba* (Chapel Hill, 1999); and Alejandro De La Fuente, *A Nation for All* (Chapel Hill and London, 2001). On Martí: Mauricio A. Font and Alfonso W. Quiroz, *The Cuban Republic and José Martí* (Lanham and Oxford, 2006); Lillian Guerra, *The Myth of José Martí* (Chapel Hill, 2005). See also Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban* (Chapel Hill, 1999) which emphasises the ubiquity of US values as a feature that both helped to define a Cuban alternative and to reinforce it.

revolutionary discourse has often made reference to the 1920s, not least in the preface to the Constitution of 1976, which hailed ‘the workers, peasants, students and intellectuals who struggled for more than fifty years [...]’ (after the aborigines, the slaves and the patriots of the two independence wars) in its invocation of those who had contributed to Cuba’s ‘traditions of combativity, strength of purpose [*firmeza*], heroism and sacrifice’.²⁹

It has often been remarked that the Cuban Revolution of 1959 was the self-declared revolution of the intellectuals, with Martí adopted by Castro as its ‘author’. A fundamentally liberal discourse about the supreme value of education and learning imbues Cuban revolutionary rhetoric, from ‘History Will Absolve Me’, in which metaphors of teaching and learning echo throughout,³⁰ to the Constitution of 1976, which noted that ‘the members of the vanguard of the generation of the centenary of Martí’s birth led their people to victory ‘nourished by their teaching [*magisterio*]’.³¹ The idea that socialism *is* cultural opportunity as well as social justice and equality became a leitmotiv of Cuban revolutionary discourse.³²

Why does any of this matter in relation to an analysis of cultural policy after the revolution of 1959? After all, we know that intellectuals have not played a leading role in the Cuban revolution, either as policy-makers or as opinion-shapers. As even an intellectual sympathetic to the revolution noted: ‘The political vanguard set the terms of debate, including those of intellectual content, in areas ranging from the reinterpretation of Cuban history to ideas about imperialism, Latin Americanism, and revolutionary culture’.³³ The lack of access to mass media or scope to debate ideas freely at universities has meant that ‘no mechanisms have emerged to give intellectuals an influence in national politics that would make full use of their capacities’.³⁴ Indeed, it was only logical that this should be the case, because by

²⁹ *Constitución*, 1976, p. 11. These words were retained in the revised version of 1992.

³⁰ Fidel Castro, ‘History Will Absolve Me’, from Fidel Castro and Régis Debray, *On Trial* (London, 1968), pp. 9–108, pp. 28–9 and esp. p. 66 for teaching and learning metaphors.

³¹ *Constitución*, 1976, p. 12. Also retained in 1992.

³² For a recent statement of this idea, see Osvaldo Martínez (an economist): ‘socialism is the absence of the exploitation of people by other people, the practice of a high degree of social equity, the most extensive possibilities for access to culture, founded on access to education and the greatest possible development of science and technology’. Cited in ‘Sobre la transición socialista en Cuba: un simposio’, *Temas*, nos. 50–51 (abril–septiembre 2007), pp. 126–62, 133.

³³ Hernández, *Looking at Cuba*, p. 44.

³⁴ Hernández, *Looking at Cuba*, p. 45. Some of the frustration felt by Cuban intellectuals may be an outcome of the fact that they have been prevented from playing a role that historically they had reason to expect. One of the most acclaimed plays staged in Havana over the last few years was *Vida y muerte de Pier Paolo Pasolini* (a translation of the work by French playwright Michel Azama). Much of the appeal of the work lay in its portrait of an intellectual who ‘never ceased to struggle like a crusader for his hopes and ideas’. Amado del Pino, ‘Dirigir es un estado diálogo’, *Entrevista con Carlos Celdrán* (theatre director), *Revolución y Cultura*, 2004, no. 3, pp. 22–6, p. 26.

the time that they came to power the revolutionary leaders themselves had founded their legitimacy on the promise to deliver access to culture for all. In consequence, their rhetoric about the importance of culture should not be dismissed as so much bad faith, not least because, in the delicate political process of sustaining legitimacy, rhetoric in itself constrains actions to some extent (too great a gap between stated values and policies implemented cannot be sustained even under an authoritarian system when the regime in question relies, as the Cuban government has done, on a strategy of popular mobilisation to overcome recurrent hardships). Moreover, as will be illustrated in the following section, there is a good deal of evidence that more often than not policy converged with rhetoric to a degree sufficient to command support, if not uncritical approbation, from many people in the cultural professions.

Culture Matters, or What has the Revolution Done for Us?

When the *comandantes* came to power, culture had long been embedded in Cuban concepts of what it is to be fully a human being and a citizen. As noted above, the revolutionaries themselves grew up in the context of this tradition, and their own political views had been shaped by it. Thus the revolutionary government did not so much try to found a wholly new culture as seek to connect the radical elements of Cuba's existing cultural traditions to the revolutionary project of cultural decolonisation. Just as the revolutionary leaders found many useable elements in pre-revolutionary historiography – predominantly but by no means only in revisionist history – so did they identify several key features of Cuban culture that complemented their political aims.³⁵ The revolution's modernising project assumed 'a rational and well-ordered approach to building a society, which goes beyond the merely political to be expressed in ethical, ideological and aesthetic modes of behaviour, codes of practice and values that shape a particular way of being and becoming a citizen'.³⁶ The government's proclamation that the revolution was the culmination of Cuban history paved the way for it to appropriate a variety of aspects of the country's past. Paradoxically, although

³⁵ There was a natural fit between pre-revolutionary, anti-imperialist revisionism and post-1959 official versions of national redemption through revolution. The evidence suggests, however, that even though the regime certainly did appropriate revisionism to its cause, it was also more eclectic in its borrowings, drawing even on conservative historians. See Nicola Miller, 'The Absolution of History: Uses of the Past in Castro's Cuba', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38:1, 2003, pp. 147–62; and Kate Quinn, 'Cuban Historiography in the 1960s: Revisionists, Revolutionaries and the Nationalist Past', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 26:3 (July 2007), pp. 378–98.

³⁶ Armando Chaguaceda, 'Nada cubano me es ajeno: notas sobre la condición ciudadana', *Temas*, nos. 30–31 (abril–septiembre 2007), pp. 118–25, p. 120.

1959 is widely seen by historians as a moment of absolute rupture, the revolutionary government itself has consistently made (selective) claims to continuity in Cuban history. Cultural policy was central to this endeavour.

As elsewhere in Latin America, where there has historically been a restricted market for cultural goods, Cuban cultural producers (many of whom returned from exile in 1959) were predisposed to welcome a role for the State in promoting culture, a role which already had quite a long history. The Constitution of 1940 – which Castro and other revolutionary leaders repeatedly declared their intention to restore – stated (article 47): ‘Culture in all of its manifestations constitutes a primary interest of the State’,³⁷ a claim echoed in the Constitution of 1976: ‘The State guides, encourages and promotes education, culture and the sciences in all their manifestations’.³⁸ The majority of cultural producers identified with the aims of the *Consejo Nacional de Cultura*, established in 1961 to ‘work on the recovery of our traditions and the dignifying of artistic and literary work’.³⁹ Most shared the government’s conviction of the urgent need for cultural decolonisation and the confronting of what just a few years earlier the poet Cintio Vitier had publicly condemned as ‘the most corrupting influence that the Western world has ever suffered’, namely ‘the so-called *American way of life* [orig. in English]’, with its capacity to ‘drain to the roots all the values and essences of everything it touches’.⁴⁰ Many people were prepared to accept the government’s argument that authentic universalism could only be embraced by those who were able to enjoy a strong sense of the local, something which had been impossible for Cuba under neo-colonialism.⁴¹

What culture meant under the Cuban Revolution was broadly conceived from the outset. All the results of creative activity geared towards aesthetic, ethical or spiritual expression – artistic, literary, musical, theatrical – professional or amateur, artisanal or industrialised, individual or collective, were brought in under the umbrella of the government’s commitment to culture. Culture was seen as a powerful integrating force, one which could reconcile the individual with society; a commitment to a rational approach to life with personal impulses and collective norms; values with ideas and imaginings.⁴² The new man, declared Che Guevara, would achieve ‘full realisation as a

³⁷ Russell H. Fitzgibbon, *The Constitutions of the Americas* (Chicago, 1948), p. 237.

³⁸ *Constitución*, 1976, p. 30 (retained in 1992). Famously, this Constitution guaranteed freedom of style but not freedom of content: ‘artistic creation is free so long as its content is not contrary to the Revolution. Forms of expression in art are free’, Article 38 d), p. 31.

³⁹ Fidel Castro, *La primera revolución socialista en América* (Mexico City, 1976), p. 140.

⁴⁰ Cintio Vitier, ‘Lo cubano en la poesía’ [1956], cited in Abel Prieto Jiménez, ‘La cultura cubana: resistencia, socialismo y revolución’, *Cuba Socialista*, no. 2 de 1996, pp. 2–11, 2.

⁴¹ Prieto Jiménez, ‘La cultura cubana’, p. 5.

⁴² For a fascinating retrospective discussion, see Jorge de la Fuente, ‘Sobre la joven intelectualidad artística’, *Temas*, no. 19, 1990, pp. 59–71, esp. p. 68.

human being, having broken the chains of alienation [...] by means of liberated work and the expression of his own human condition through culture and art'.⁴³ A distinction was drawn between 'the multiple forms of traditional, routine, settled activity, the function of which is the continuation of social processes, the connection of the past with the present and the stability of the social system' and 'the active, revolutionary element, which provokes both quantitative and qualitative change in society and makes it progress'. The latter, culture, was hailed as 'the permanent and dynamic connection between the present and the future of society'.⁴⁴ For the Cuban revolutionaries, the impulse to artistic experimentation was a manifestation of the urge for freedom, so experimentation of form – if not always of content – was deemed to be essential to a revolutionary culture. Che Guevara famously condemned socialist realism,⁴⁵ and one of the crucial contexts for understanding the cultural policy of the revolutionary government is the relationship with the Soviet Union. Culture became one arena in which the Cubans could and did assert their independence, their greater capacity for tolerance, their commitment to an authentically revolutionary culture. It was not just capitalist alienation against which the Cuban revolutionaries rebelled, but also Soviet-style communist culture.

The idea that the whole range of cultural production should be available to everybody was a constant tenet of official policy.⁴⁶ Even in one of the most restrictive government statements on culture (declaring that aesthetic values could not be separated out from ideological content), it was emphasised that: 'the best cultural works, the best artistic creations of humanity must be available to the people'.⁴⁷ As discussed above, the vision of a new kind of culture – no longer elitist and alienated – that was articulated in official discourse drew upon well-established Cuban values and was widely supported. Although it was certainly promoted and to an extent steered by the regime, most culture professionals and a variety of other social actors were eager to contribute. This helps to explain why the revolutionary government built up a reserve of legitimacy during the early 1960s that for many people has never been exhausted.

⁴³ Che Guevara, *El socialismo y el hombre [en Cuba]* (Montevideo, 1965), p. 15.

⁴⁴ Roberto Roque Pujol, 'Las funciones del complejo de dirección del trabajo cultural', *Temas*, no. 6 (1985), pp. 17–35, 18.

⁴⁵ Guevara, *El socialismo*, pp. 18–19.

⁴⁶ For a collection of official statements on Cuban cultural policy, see *Política cultural de la Revolución Cubana: documentos* (Havana, 1977). For a recent discussion, see the interview with Abel Prieto, Minister of Culture, 'Cuba Reminds Many Intellectuals of What They Ceased to Be', *Cubanow – The Digital Magazine of Cuban Arts and Culture*, <http://www.cubanow.net/global/loader.php?secc=10&cont=culture/num29/01.htm> [accessed 06/02/07].

⁴⁷ Fidel Castro, 'En la clausura del primer congreso nacional de educación y cultura', 30 April 1971, in Fidel Castro, *Discursos* (Havana, 1976), 2 vols., vol. I, pp. 139–60, p. 151.

The incoming revolutionary government moved quickly to establish an abundance of cultural organisations. It is worth listing these together here to convey the sheer range of the initiatives undertaken. During this exhilarating time, when it seemed to intellectuals that anything was possible,⁴⁸ a National Theatre and a National Art School were founded, both of which had branches throughout the island, along with *Casa de las Américas*,⁴⁹ UNEAC (the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba), ICAIC (the Cuban Film Institute), two national dance companies, a national symphony orchestra, a national choir and an Institute of Ethnology and Folklore. Alicia Alonso, founder of the first Cuban ballet school in 1948, recalled how the new government took great interest in developing her work, supporting ‘a series of tours around the island, continuously talking about ballet’, which helped to create the climate in which the newly-founded *Ballet Nacional de Cuba* developed its reputation.⁵⁰ University extension programmes were also introduced, making use of existing educational buildings around the country,⁵¹ and public libraries opened. Later in the 1960s a series of music projects got underway: the Cuban Orchestra of Modern Music in 1967, incubator of the famous Afro-Cuban jazz group Irakere, and the *Grupo de Experimentación Sonora* (Group of Sound Experimentation), founded by Leo Brouwer in 1969 and linked to ICAIC. The self-declared ‘mission’ of this group was ‘to transform the repertoire of Cuban popular music as much as possible’, trying to transcend the problem that all popular music tends to be imitative. Participants recall this as a transformative time in their lives.⁵² The blurring of boundaries between state and civil society certainly generated tensions at times, but many of these experiments in cultural decolonisation were experienced by participants as immensely creative.

Moreover, the government continued to generate new initiatives, tending to concentrate on different areas of culture in different decades. Another cluster of organisations was established along with the Ministry of Culture in 1976, designed to renew cultural activity after the ‘grey years’: the *Instituto Superior del Arte*, later credited with creating ‘a space for artistic speculation and experimentation’ where ‘the proposals of a newer generation made themselves heard’, thereby contributing to the revival of Cuban visual arts in the 1980s,⁵³ the *Teatro de Arte Popular*; the expansion of UNEAC to include theatre and cinema, television and radio as well as literature, the plastic arts

⁴⁸ See the recollections of 1 January 1959 published by leading Cuban writers on the twentieth anniversary of the revolution. *La Gaceta de Cuba*, no. 174 (January 1979), pp. 6–9.

⁴⁹ John A. Loomis, *Revolution of Forms: Cuba's Forgotten Art Schools* (New York, 1999).

⁵⁰ Cited in Kirk and Padura, *Culture*, p. 46.

⁵¹ ‘Sobre la transición’, *Temas*, nos. 50–51, p. 131.

⁵² Jaime Sarusky, ‘¿Qué hacer? con la música popular cubana’, *Revolución y Cultura*, 2004, no. 3, pp. 27–33, p. 28.

⁵³ Roberto Fabelo, in Kirk and Padura, *Culture*, p. 135.

and music;⁵⁴ and, in 1979, the first *Bienal Internacional de Humorismo y Gráfica Militantes* (International Festival of Political Cartoon and Graphic Art), which represented an important albeit little known part of Cuban culture. After 1959, photographers played a key role in creating the iconography of the revolution, especially the paradigmatic *Guerrillero Heroico* and images of Fidel and Martí. Later, the work of photographers acquired a more popular dimension: in the 1980s José Figueroa became well-known for his photographs of wall slogans – not only those dedicated to ‘exaltation of the government, but also those that demonstrate popular wisdom, in all its mixture of humour and double meaning, written on spaces that are often not photogenic.’⁵⁵ The Cuban Revolution is also famed for its poster art and for the high quality of graphic design – inspired by ‘Western modernism’ – on the *vallas* (billboards) that replaced commercial hoardings around Cuban towns.⁵⁶

In the 1980s, Cuba developed its renowned annual Latin American film festival, followed in the 1990s by its now equally prestigious Arts Biennale and a well-established International Book Fair, which – like the film festival – is held throughout the provinces as well as in Havana. More recently, Cuba held the 2003 International Festival of Hip-Hop and established a record label, *Colibrí* (Hummingbird) intended for music that would not readily find a commercial audience.⁵⁷ Through these festivals and events, which have been well-attended by people from throughout Latin America, some parts of Africa and elsewhere in the developing world, the government has allowed certain foreign ideas and influences into Cuba, even if the flow

⁵⁴ See the reports of the Second UNEAC Congress in *La Gaceta de Cuba*, no. 162 (November–December 1977), esp. Nicolás Guillén’s ‘Informe central’, pp. 7–11.

⁵⁵ Nahela Hechavarría Pouymiró, ‘La seducción del instante. Un siglo y media de fotografía documental en Cuba, 1840–1990’, *Revolución y Cultura*, 2004, no. 2 (abril–junio), pp. 36–45, 43. See also Tim B. Wride, *Shifting Tides: Cuban Photography After the Revolution* (Los Angeles, 2001); and Barry Dawson, *Street Graphics Cuba* (London, 2001).

⁵⁶ David Craven, *The New Concept of Art and Popular Culture in Nicaragua since the Revolution in 1979* (Lewiston NY, 1989), p. 242.

⁵⁷ There is quite a lot of work on the Cuban film industry; a good starting point is Michael Chanan, *Cuban Cinema* (Minneapolis, 2004). Research into theatre and music has recently begun, much of it carried out by Cuban academics and published in Cuban periodicals. On recent developments in music, see the collection of articles, ‘Música hecha en Cuba’, spread over two issues of *La Gaceta de Cuba*: noviembre-diciembre 2006 and julio-agosto 2007. See also Robin D. Moore, *Music and the Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba* (Berkeley CA, 2006). On theatre: Amado del Pino, ‘Actores estrenando el siglo. Escena cubana del XXI’, *Revolución y Cultura*, no. 3, 2005, pp. 48–52, in which he identified the 1990s as a difficult decade for theatre, partly because many actors moved into the more vibrant film and television industries, but was more optimistic about the 2000s. Abelardo Estorino talks about government policy towards theatre in his interview in Kirk and Padura, *Culture*. On film, rap and visual arts, see Fernandes, *Cuba Represent!*. On visual arts: *Revolución y Cultura*, 2004, no. 3; and Gary R. Libby, *Cuba: A History in Art* (Daytona Beach, 1997).

has certainly not been unrestricted and Cuban intellectuals, in particular, have often complained about the lack of contact with 'Western' cultures. The government has also thereby justified its claims to be the cultural champion of Latin America, 'safeguarding the best' of 'our common heritage',⁵⁸ and – again drawing on a long tradition that it is Cuba's role to act as a bridge or door to other worlds – opening up connections with other countries of Latin America, the Caribbean and, in the 1970s, with Africa.

Another key aspect of government policy mentioned by virtually everybody, when asked by Kirk and Padura why they still supported the revolution into the twenty-first century, was the successful implementation of mass education. The initial aim was to remove previous inequalities of opportunity, particularly between the urban and rural areas (where there was little schooling before the revolution) and between different districts within urban areas. Resources were devoted to teacher training and, furthermore, the general policy of fixing incomes, so that there was little variation between workers and professionals, made teaching a desirable profession which the government took care also to make a prestigious one.⁵⁹ By 1980, all Cuban children had access to ten years of education.⁶⁰

Martin Carnoy's recent research found that what he called 'state-generated social capital', that is the state's role in creating a context in which educational achievement is highly valued, played an important, although not all-determining role in explaining why it was that Cuban children from all backgrounds consistently did better at school than their counterparts in either Brazil or Chile.⁶¹ In similar vein, Sheryl Lutjens has argued that Cuban evidence provides examples of a more participatory civil society being promoted by state education policy.⁶² As has often been pointed out, there are authoritarian aspects to the Cuban education system, but the research findings we have available indicate that Cuban pedagogy has been more imaginative than is implied by those who portray it primarily as a means of indoctrination. Russian child-centred educational philosophy fed into Cuban policy, not only in the insistence that children at all levels spend time doing manual work every week, but also in the policy that a child should have the same teacher throughout primary school and – more recently – in lower

⁵⁸ 'Dictámenes' of the Second UNEAC Congress, *La Gaceta de Cuba*, no. 162 (noviembre–diciembre, 1977), pp. 11–15, 12.

⁵⁹ Martin Carnoy, with Amber K. Gove and Jeffery H. Marshall, *Cuba's Academic Advantage. Why Students in Cuba Do Better in School* (Stanford, 2007), p. 29. The policy was effective at attracting and retaining good teachers until it became possible to earn far more than a teacher's salary by working in the tourist trade. See also Richard Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford, 1969). ⁶⁰ Carnoy, *Cuba's Academic Advantage*, p. 29.

⁶¹ Carnoy, *Cuba's Academic Advantage*, esp. p. 15.

⁶² Sheryl L. Lutjens, *The State, Bureaucracy, and the Cuban Schools* (Boulder, 1996).

secondary too.⁶³ So did the work of Paulo Freire – with his emphasis on the importance of dialogue – and Frantz Fanon’s ideas about critical acumen being crucial to decolonisation of the mind.

One other feature of government cultural policy that has perhaps not received the attention it warrants is the use of language. Changing the language was deemed by the government to be a necessary part of decolonisation. From Cuba’s formal independence in 1902 until the revolution, claimed Nicolás Guillén, US imperialism had not only exploited the Cuban economy but had also imposed ‘a particular sort of language, a sort of *slang* [in English in orig.] riddled with barbarisms’.⁶⁴ Beginning with the Literacy Campaign of 1961, a set of common referents were created that enabled the poor ‘[to appropriate] the realms of language from which they had been barred, and [to make] them part of their culture’.⁶⁵ Music played an important role in this transformation: Silvio Rodríguez recalled deliberately setting out to extend the parameters of what could be included in song lyrics.⁶⁶ It was also the explicit aim of Leo Brouwer’s Grupo de Experimentación Sonora to extend the range of references and vocabulary employed in the lyrics of Cuban popular songs. In general, Brouwer argued, ‘The generation of the Revolution ... changed the language and the people [continue to] do so, not by mechanical changes but by transformations within their society’.⁶⁷

In sum, the revolutionary government has cumulatively done a significant amount to promote cultural production far beyond the imperatives of propaganda and indoctrination, consistently investing in institutions, organisations and initiatives for both professionals and amateurs. In its pursuit – at times rather relentless – of democratisation of both production and consumption, quality of output sometimes suffered. Some initiatives have been criticised for acquiescing in mediocrity, as Nancy Morejón put it, ‘in the name of a supposed form of equality’. One salient example was the ‘new theatre’ of the 1970s, when almost all resources for drama were directed towards collective, participatory theatre rather than traditional theatre.⁶⁸ Furthermore, there have been times of great material scarcity. Overall, however, the Cuban government has sustained a commitment to allocating resources for cultural activity and has endeavoured continually to distribute

⁶³ Lutjens, *The State*, pp. 30–1.

⁶⁴ Nicolás Guillén, ‘Informe central’, *La Gaceta de Cuba*, no. 162 (Noviembre–Diciembre 1977), pp. 7–11, 10.

⁶⁵ Hernández, *Looking at Cuba*, p. 119. On the literacy campaign, see Richard R. Fagen, *Cuba: The Political Content of Adult Education* (Stanford, 1964), which analyses the contents of the main manual used, ‘Alfabetecemos’, and Fagen’s *The Transformation*.

⁶⁶ Silvio Rodríguez, in Kirk and Padura, *Culture*, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Sarusky, ‘¿Qué hacer con la música popular cubana?’, p. 29.

⁶⁸ Nancy Morejón and Abelardo Estorino, in Kirk and Padura, *Culture*, pp. 116 and 58, respectively.

them around the island. Where its record has been less impressive, as is well known, has been in allowing access to information and cultural products from outside Cuba. Many people would argue that production and reception are inextricably linked and that opportunities to encounter ideas and images from elsewhere are crucial to creativity. Nevertheless, in order to understand why many cultural professionals remain prepared to give the revolution the benefit of the doubt, policies of state control and repression have to be set in the context of five decades of investment in an extensive network of cultural activities and organisations.

Conclusions

In an intriguing article published in the Communist Party journal *Cuba Socialista* in 1996, shortly before he left office, Minister of Culture Armando Hart set out a critique of Western modernity that would strike a chord across much of Latin America. Reason and science had brought great benefits, he argued, but at the expense of underestimating the importance of spirituality and myth in human practice. Spirituality had been relegated to the category of the metaphysical, whereas in fact, he claimed, it has materialist roots, arising as it does out of human activity. Marx, Lenin and all the East European socialist regimes of the twentieth century had taken a reductionist view of the superstructure, which was, Hart stated, 'their most important theoretical error', because it meant that they had been unable to harness 'the best in people' to the creation of socialism. Indeed, in the many articles in Cuban periodicals analysing the collapse of socialism in the Eastern bloc, there is repeated criticism of their cultural repressiveness,⁶⁹ which is seen as indicative of 'an anti-humanism founded in over-theoretical positions and dogmatic practices' rather than lived experience.⁷⁰ Humanism, which Cubans often make synonymous with anti-dogmatism, has often been proclaimed as the central value of Cuban culture, both before and after the 1959 Revolution.

Hart's article went on to claim that the Cuban government took particular pride in having incorporated 'an ethical sense of life and of history' into its own concept of revolution. Such a set of ethical principles could not be derived, he suggested, from reason alone. Reasoning played an important

⁶⁹ See, for example, *Temas*, nos. 50–51 (abril–septiembre 2007), special issue on *Transiciones y postransiciones*; also Arturo Andrés Roig, 'El humanismo y el antidogmatismo del Che Guevara', *Contracorriente*, no. 8, 1997, pp. 29–33, 29. For a theoretical critique of the idea that culture could be confined to the superstructure, see Gonzalo Carnet Riera, 'El contorno económico de la cultura artística', *Temas*, no. 17, 1989, pp. 47–72.

⁷⁰ 'Ideología y ideales en la Revolución cubana: Mesa redonda', *Contracorriente*, no. 10, 1997, pp. 120–42, 129.

part in the process, but a full grasp of the message of human liberation could only come through complementing it with 'our feelings, emotions and actions'. The lack of 'an ethics worthy of the level of knowledge and information reached by humanity' was 'the great deficit of modernity'. In order, then, for reason to achieve 'a definitive victory', 'it had to be strengthened and crowned with ethical principles'. In other words, in order for the European Enlightenment truly to fulfil its goals, its ideas had to be complemented by 'the political vision and the human sensitivity of the culture of our America', which in turn required an appreciation of the value of subjectivity, spirituality and myth. The article explicitly echoes Mariátegui's thought and links it to that of Gramsci and Che Guevara.⁷¹ As I have argued elsewhere, a variety of Latin American thinkers have emphasised these elements as crucial constituents not only of a distinctively Latin American culture but also of an alternative Latin American model of modernity that began to be worked out explicitly in contrast to the US model during the early twentieth century, and reached its most elaborated form in the work of Mariátegui.⁷²

The enduring strength and appeal of this alternative version of modernity that finds space for an ethical approach to life is one reason, I suggest, why Cuba still has such a substantial and successful community of cultural producers, despite all the material and political difficulties life on the island entails. Cuban conceptions of how to be modern have traditionally (the word is used advisedly) consisted less of a master narrative and more of a series of *mises en scènes*: 'Since the nineteenth century, the crystallization of our national consciousness had required us to rummage around in history in order to collect up all the loose pieces of the jigsaw puzzle'.⁷³ The government has at times encouraged this tradition – which in many ways suited its own purposes, at others tolerated it, at others sought to impose a Marxist-nationalist master narrative upon it – but, I would suggest, only with partial success. Like all grand constructivist projects, the Cuban government's master narrative worked only to the extent that it resonated with people's existing 'spaces of experience' and 'horizons of expectation'.⁷⁴ When

⁷¹ All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Armando Hart Dávalos, 'Hacia el siglo XXI. Fuentes necesarias', *Cuba Socialista*, no. 3 de 1996, pp. 2–14.

⁷² Nicola Miller, *Reinventing Modernity in Latin America: Intellectuals Imagine the Future, 1900–1930* (New York and London, 2008).

⁷³ Graziella Pogolotti, 'El centenario de un fundador', *Revolución y Cultura*, 2004, no. 4, pp. 59–60, 59.

⁷⁴ The terms are from Reinhart Koselleck, "'Space of Experience" and "Horizon of Expectation": Two Historical Categories', in his *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge MA, and London: 1985), pp. 267–88; for the argument that the Cuban government was successful in imposing its grand narrative, see Davies, 'Surviving'.

UNEAC, in the midst of 'the grey years', called upon writers to create 'works in which shone a love of life and the justice typical of a new world in constant progress',⁷⁵ the exhortation lacked plausibility, not least because it contradicted the Cuban government's own discourse, which was not one of an uninterrupted movement of progress towards a bright and shiny, squeaky-clean (US-style) future, but instead of recurrent apocalyptic renewal based on the regenerating powers of youth.

Leonardo Padura argues that the policy reorientation signalled by the founding of the Ministry of Culture in 1976 was the outcome of the state beginning 'to assimilate the need for a more profound change in policy' after 'several grave political errors [...], both in the treatment of intellectuals and in the very definition of what artistic expression should be'. The shift did not originate from within the government, but 'was demanded by artists themselves, who expressed their feelings clearly in their work'.⁷⁶ Similarly, Roberto Fernández Retamar argues that the Ministry of Culture 'took over the best traces of the cultural work accomplished by the revolution and found strength and support in the institutions and personalities that had rejected (and in different ways, suffered) the mediocrity of the Grey Quinquennium'.⁷⁷ Cuba's tradition of transculturation and heterogeneity was strong enough – partly because it had been encouraged (albeit intermittently) by the government itself – to survive attempts to harness it at moments when the government was in thrall to cruder concerns. More often than not, the state proved flexible enough to respond to criticism, and indeed to incorporate it successfully so that its own hegemony was reproduced.⁷⁸

Thus, the picture of a regime that failed to implement a modernist project succumbing to postmodern pressures over which it has little control does not strike me as a persuasive one. Instead, I would argue that the Revolution has overseen the continuation of a long Cuban history of elaborating an alternative version of modernity. This alternative entails a keen awareness of all the dangers of excessive rationalisation pointed out by postmodernists, but it strives to maintain, nonetheless, the sense of agency and history that many Cuban intellectuals see as having been lost in postmodernism.⁷⁹ In the context of international debates about whether the Enlightenment should be

⁷⁵ 'Dictámenes', *La Gaceta de Cuba*, no. 162, p. 12.

⁷⁶ In Kirk and Padura, *Culture*, p. 179.

⁷⁷ Roberto Fernández Retamar, 'The Enormity of Cuba', *Boundary 2*, 23:3 (Fall 1996), pp. 165–90, 181.

⁷⁸ Fernandes, *Cuba Represent!*, p. 26.

⁷⁹ For example, see Rinaldo Acosta's review of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problemas literarios y estéticos*, in *Temas*, no. 12 (1987), pp. 165–73, in which he welcomes Bakhtin's 'profoundly dialectical and historical' approach, contrasting it favourably with 'certain contemporary tendencies to examine the phenomenon of intertextuality by dehistoricising it and emptying it of ideological significance' (p. 173).

rejected or reformulated, it is worth pausing to think about the record of the Cuban experience of trying to develop an inclusive modern culture.

If, as Mona Rosendahl has suggested, the widespread experience of participation in the Revolution is one of the main reasons for its survival,⁸⁰ then it is worth noting that many people's experiences of participation would have been cultural as well as economic, social and political, including, for example, the rituals, ceremonies and performances associated with the new revolutionary order. To a considerable extent, it is genuinely plausible for Abel Prieto, currently Minister of Culture, to claim:

With the Revolution [...] for the first time Cubans had access to the whole of their historical and artistic inheritance. Not only was there an intensive process of rescuing and promoting the art and literature produced by intellectual minorities throughout our history, but also the popular traditions were trawled through by researchers, and the authentic crucible of *cubanía*, in its many and varied nutrients, was placed at the disposal of the great masses.⁸¹

Solitary cultural consumption was not a priority for the government, but then neither had it been so historically.⁸² Rafael Hernández has argued that the survival of the Cuban Revolution 'was not thanks to economic riches or political agility but thanks to its "cultural capital" – [dating back to] the eighteenth century – of which the revolution may be seen as both inheritor and promoter'.⁸³ Likewise, he argues that the gains of the Revolution have not only been material but also cultural, including 'social and national consciousness'.⁸⁴ Far more research needs to be done, but evidence is already accumulating in support of this argument. By selectively drawing upon Cuba's pre-revolutionary cultural traditions and by supporting a wide range of cultural initiatives, the revolutionary government succeeded to a

⁸⁰ Rosendahl, *Inside the Revolution*, pp. 166–7.

⁸¹ Abel Prieto Jiménez, 'La cultura cubana: resistencia, socialismo y revolución', *Cuba Socialista*, 1996, no. 2, pp. 2–11, p. 5. The contributions to Cuban history and culture of various previously ignored groups, such as women, Afro-Cubans and labourers, have indeed been investigated by Cuban researchers and brought into the national narrative. The many complaints that can be found in periodical literature over the last ten to fifteen years that none of this has gone far enough are in themselves indicative of a widespread commitment to cultural inclusiveness. For example, Luisa Campuzano, who has done a great deal to establish the significance of contributions from women writers throughout Cuba's history, lamented in 1997 that the revolution still lacked women narrators, a fact which she attributed, in part, to a continuing reluctance within Cuban society to embrace difference. Luisa Campuzano, 'Cuba 1961: los textos narrativos de las alfabetizadoras – Conflictos de género, clase y canon', *Unión, Revista de Literatura y Arte*, no. 26, 1997, pp. 52–8, esp. p. 58, fn. 38. Kirk and Padura's interviewees included only two women, Alicia Alonso and Nancy Morejón, reflecting women's under-representation in the cultural field as a whole.

⁸² Smorkaloff, *Readers and Writers in Cuba: A Social History of Print Culture, 1830s–1930s* (New York, 1997).

⁸³ Hernández, *Looking at Cuba*, p. 9.

⁸⁴ Hernández, *Looking at Cuba*, p. 14.

significant extent in overseeing the consolidation of a sense of what modern culture can be that has resonated widely among both cultural producers and their audiences. A national culture that is 'non-alienating' and non-North Americanised has not been peripheral to the Revolution's self image but central to it; indeed – despite all the problems – it has perhaps been its lasting achievement.